Symmetry

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/54201361.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationship:
Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Characters:
Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Original Male Character(s), Bernard "Benny" DeMarco

Additional Tags:
Canon Compliant, Canon-Typical Violence, World War II, Prisoner of War, Blood and Injury, Pain, Threats of Rape/Non-Con, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Scars, Psychological Trauma, Established Relationship, Cruelty, Hugs, Gale "Buck" Cleven Needs a Hug, Affection, Love, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-03-02 Words: 3,678 Chapters: 1/1

Symmetry

by Avonne

Summary

Not all of Gale's scars are from shrapnel wounds.

Notes

A Tumblr headcanon that became a full-fledged fic. Please read the tags.

The train rocks Gale back and forth, back and forth on the uncomfortable bench the Germans forced him to sit on. He was captured with three replacements he has never even talked to before, their names only vague fragments of John's jokes in his mind. They look to him as if he's their guiding flare in the soup of captivity, but he's just as lost as they are. How does one make it out sane and alive?

The darkness outside and the steady rocking would usually make him sleepy, but the dread that creeps around in his mind, coming and going, keeps him awake beyond exhaustion. This is the one thing he tried to avoid at all costs. The reason why he flew a fort that was more holes than metal all the way from England to Africa. He would have rather died than become a prisoner of war, and yet, when the time came to bet his life on a game already lost, he couldn't do it. Perhaps John would have had the guts to fight until they shot him dead, but Gale's will to live kicked in when the first weapon pointed right at the middle of his chest.

No use lamenting it. He's at the enemy's mercy now until he finds a way out.

As always, he tries to keep a cool head. Assess his options. For now, the best path forward seems to be staying quiet. At least until he gets his bearings and patches himself up. He has a few wounds that should be seen to if he wants to avoid an infection. Particularly, the gash on his right cheek that Our Baby's shattered hull cut into his face. It hurts with a throbbing, sharp pain, and bled horribly when he hung in his parachute, but all the dried blood clotted it together now. It will probably open up again once he gets a chance to clean it.

He wonders what it looks like. Hasn't had a chance to see it yet. How much of it will be permanent? Vanity isn't one of his stronger traits but he'll have to live with this change for the rest of his life. However long that may be. It worries him. There's no way to conceal it. People are going to stare and wonder, even ask what happened; his friends will make up stories, one more heroic than the other and just as false for it; and John, well… He might press his lips to it and pretend that the touch healed it, although it wouldn't.

Gale doesn't want to be defined by such a mark. A scar on one's face is an imprint on one's person. Once there, you can never go back and be the old you again. It changes how people see you. Will it change how they love him too?

He takes a deep breath.

Suddenly, laughter erupts on the other end of the train car, where a bunch of guards are going through the items they confiscated from the captives. Cigarettes, chocolate and the like. They took Gale's wallet too, and he notes with alarm that its contents are the reason for the Germans' amusement. He has a photo of him, Marge, John and one of Marge's friends in there, from a dance they went to. He didn't dare keep one of only John or the two of them together. He thanks his foresight now. What would they do if they guessed? If they knew about the things Gale liked? He would be ripped to shreds.

As he watches, the guards look up at him, then back to the photo. Some of them have clearly had a few drinks even though Gale's sure that their superior officers would reprimand them for it. But on a train like this in the middle of the night? No one cares. They can do whatever they want. There's no record of Gale's capture, not yet - he feels like they could kill him here and now and wouldn't suffer any consequences.

Alcohol, as always, makes the good better and the bad worse. It used to make the palm of Gale's dad slap harder, the indifference of his mother last longer, John's lips on his taste sweeter. This time, it pulls the pin of the Germans' hate like one would pull a bomb's. They're trying to provoke him, he can tell. Looking for a reason to beat the shit out of him, he imagines. But some mocking laughter and rude gestures won't crack him. They don't even scratch the surface.

One of the guards with a cruel quirk to his mouth and dark, calculating eyes draws a finger over his own cheek and points at Gale's photo. Some of the others laugh again. A frown digs lines between Gale's eyebrows. What are they saying?

One of the American boys sitting across from him gives him a frightened, worried look. He can't be older than eighteen. Now, for who knows how long, his life will be on hold until they're set free one way or another. Gale feels the weight of responsibility tighten the shield around his heart. He forces his features to relax and gives the boy a reassuring glance. It does what it ought to - the boy's shaking isn't so obvious anymore.

But Gale only has a brief moment to enjoy the spark of positivity. A second later, the cruel-looking guard walks over to them and sits on the bench across the aisle from Gale. They stare at one another. Gale feels like a cornered wolf. His wounds throb, he's defanged, but he's a

wolf all the same. If he's attacked, he'll bite.

The German man pulls out a sheathed knife. He says something to his friends, a dark grin on his face. Some of the guards chuckle, others cheer him on as if he was doing a dare in a game, the rest shake their heads. He doesn't seem to care about the latter. He turns back to Gale, and his grin widens.

"Did you get that when the Luftwaffe shot you down?" The man asks in harsh, accented English. He plays with the knife in his hands. Unsheaths it, then draws the tip of the blade lightly over his own cheek. "Schade." He huffs a laugh. "A shame. Pretty no more."

Gale turns away from him, hoping that ignoring it is the best tactic. However, it just seems to egg the man on. His tone gets meaner, as if anger boils just under the surface. He looks younger than Gale but with a pallor to his skin that only a long time at war can paint on a man's face. It's a volatile combination. Gale's instincts scream at him to run, but there's no escape route.

One of the other drunk Germans calls out. The man sitting close to Gale flashes his teeth again. There's nothing warm in his smile. "He says we can improve it a little. I'm a, how do you say - a bit of an artist." The man stands up and leans into Gale's space. "And I like symmetry."

He's close enough that Gale can smell the stink of his breath. They stare each other down. The train thuds on, rocking them back and forth. Nobody speaks - they're all holding their breaths to see what breaks the tension. When the man glances at Gale's lips, panic spikes in Gale's heart. If those guards are all in, he can't defend himself, they can do whatever they want no matter how he fights. He was warned about this. But he tries to think rationally. Losing control just makes a man more vulnerable. He must keep himself together.

Although his pulse races, he knows he needs to show strength to keep the boys' spirits up. They look to him for hope and an illusion of safety. If he breaks, they probably all do. So, he doesn't let any of his fears show. He puts all the emotions swirling inside him into a threatening look that he holds until the drunk guard backs off again.

"Schade." The man repeats with a lewd grin, then walks back to the others who laugh and swat at him as though he has just done something hilarious.

Gale clenches his fist in his pocket, out of sight.

“Major?” One of the American guys asks in a whisper. “Are you okay?”

Gale keeps his expression stoic as stone. “I’ll live, Jimmy.”

“I thought he was gonna -”

“He was bluffing.” It doesn’t ring true. The man most certainly wasn't bluffing. If anything, he acted as though it was all just foreplay. Gale’s voice sounds shaky to him but he knows the boys don’t notice. He looks at the three men’s pale, terrified faces and nods at them. “Don't worry, boys. We’ll get through this. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” They all mumble.

When their eyes meet his again, he sees a small ray of hope. Anything he says, they’ll believe it and would never consider that Gale is just as vulnerable and human as they are. In Gale’s books, that’s how it should be. He was appointed to be a leader, so lead he will. He can feel the weight of the drunk German's gaze on him for the rest of the ride, but he ignores it and stares out the window. He hopes John is all right.

He doesn’t know where they stop, but it's still pitch black outside when they herd them off the train. Guns poke at their backs and hands shove them forward roughly. Being an officer, he’s separated from the boys to be led to a different area of the camp they're in. Cold bites into the wound on his cheek. As he’s marched down a dark gap between two barracks, he wonders about Jimmy and his friends, the fear on their faces as Gale was told to walk away from them. Will he ever see them again?

Suddenly, arms wind around him from behind.

It happens too fast for him to defend himself. The four guards with him slam him into the side of the building and hold his trashing body immobile. He wants to cry out for help but one of them steps in front of him, and a hand clamps around Gale’s jaw so hard that the flesh squeezed against his teeth hurts, and he can feel his wound open up under the pressure of the fingers digging into his cheek. He tries to fight them off but it’s futile. Can’t always beat the odds.

“A warm welcome, Major.” The man all but crushing his jaw chuckles. It’s the same one from the train. The smell of alcohol reeks from him,

along with a sense of cruelty that sends chills down Gale's spine. He raises his other hand. Metal glints in the pale searchlight that scans the camp from the closest watchtower. "I thought I would fulfill my offer."

Gale tries to kick him but the man knees him in the groin. His eyes are still squeezed shut in pain when the guard turns Gale's head to the side. He presses the knife to Gale's left cheek, cold metal to the heat of terror, and cuts him.

The sharp blade slices through his soft flesh with sickening ease.

The noise it tears out of Gale despite his closed mouth makes his own stomach roil. The pain, he can take, but the helplessness fills him with panic. Agony explodes on his face in a burst of blood that spills down his jaw and neck like a waterfall. He manages to free an arm and break the man's grip on his jaw to punch him in the face, but the other Germans intervene quickly and hold him down.

"Help!" He calls out. "Guards!"

The man who cut him spits blood on the ground. He spares a few angry words to the other three, then curses. The sound of boots on gravel approach.

"You got lucky this time." He sneers at Gale, then jerks his head at the others. Before the guards coming to investigate could find them, they drag him back out onto the main path through the camp, where Gale would be shot down faster than he could kill even one of the bastards. They take him to a holding cell, shove him inside and leave without another word. The freezing, dark room traps Gale alone with his pain and a suffocating trepidation.

His wounds aren't tended to until they transfer him to the stalag he assumes he's to stay at for the rest of the war. The man who cut him isn't assigned there - a miracle he couldn't be more thankful for. The unfairness of what he went through eats at him day and night. In a fair fight, man to man, he would have been able to protect himself, but that guard wasn't looking for fair. He just wanted to take something from Gale. Something permanent.

Gale doesn't let himself think about what else could have happened.

In the stalag, he reunites with some of his crew, including DeMarco,

who gives him a bone-crushing hug, then gestures at Gale's face. “Shit, shrapnel got both sides?”

Gale hums. “Could've been worse.” He crosses his arms. “Do you know anyone who could patch me up?”

Benny does. He takes Gale to one of the cramped barracks where an army surgeon sits at a bare table, a circle of injured, shivering men around him. He shoots Gale a tired look, then gestures at a rickety wooden chair next to him. “Seen worse. We’ll get you sorted, Major.”

The knife cut needs stitches, the shrapnel wound is already half-healed. Gale sits patiently, his mind a thousand miles away as the doctor cleans both wounds with something that stings enough to make DeMarco wince at the sight, but Gale just grits his teeth through it. For the stitches, they have nothing to numb the pain. Probably used to men with less self-control, the surgeon doesn’t seem to trust Gale to keep still enough for it, so he, too, turns Gale’s head by force the same way the other held him in place - by holding his jaw. He’s much gentler about it, but that just makes it worse.

Something in Gale’s stomach lurches with nauseating intensity.

An unwelcome association forms in his mind.

John used to hold his face like this.

Sometimes, when they were in bed together, he’d fit his hand gently around Gale’s jaw, just cradling it to turn his head to the side and kiss his way up and down the slope of Gale’s neck until Gale shifted against his hand to be able to kiss his palm. It used to make Gale so thrilled, to be touched like that. He loved it. Now, with both of his cheeks aching as if on fire, and the bruises from the night he was cut still aching, the last thing he wants is to think of John.

But the doc's hold on his jaw eases up even more as the needle sinks into Gale's skin and Gale doesn’t flinch away, and Gale’s mind makes the connection again. Memories come unbidden to his mind. John’s warm hand on his face. John’s thumb on his jaw. The lines of his palm against Gale’s lips like an offering of fate, his fingertips light on Gale’s cheek. Lips on his neck, sweet words whispered in his ear.

The pain in the fresh wound flares up as the thread pulls it together. Gale closes his eyes against it. A single tear forces its way past his eyelid and trickles down from the corner of his eye. It’s warm. Salt spills into the shrapnel wound, stings. The doctor holds his head

steady. *John,* he thinks. Slow horror spreads further in his mind.

The camp isn't as bad as he feared but he struggles nevertheless. Sleep is elusive. His bruises fade from his jaw only for dark circles to appear around his eyes. The cuts on his cheeks heal into pink lines, their twin paths forever etched into his skin. He can't look into a mirror without seeing them. Each time his unfamiliar reflection stares back, he feels the ghost sensation of something squeezing his jaw. He feels like a different man. Every time someone he knows ends up in the camp, they comment on it - "it's not that bad" and "nice souvenirs, Buck. Wanna see mine?"

He sleeps alone in the freezing cold and tries not to think of John. When he doesn't manage to avoid it, he imagines he can send a message if he wishes hard enough. *"Be safe."* He thinks over and over again. *"I'll see you on the other side."*

Of course, he should have known that John and staying safe are things that don't go hand in hand most times.

When Gale spots him in the crowd of downed flyers marched into the camp one day, he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. With all those people around, he can't do either, but he feels the pressure behind his eyes and the lead weight of worry in his heart. How are they going to make it out?

John all but collapses in his arms once they're safe in the relative privacy of Gale's barrack.

"I thought you were dead." His voice comes out hollow and wet into Gale's neck. He's so heavy. So beaten and worn-out. His arms tremble from the simple effort of raising them. Over his shoulder, Gale sees their friends share a wordless look and move to step outside to give them a moment alone. When the door closes behind them, something starts shaking in Gale deep inside. He rubs his hands up and down John's back and tries not to cry.

"You *look* like you're dead."

John pulls back just enough to get a good look at him. His right eye is bloodshot and bruised all around. He still manages to grin. "Krauts thought so too."

Gale's palms run down John's arms, over his chest, his stomach, just to feel that he's whole and alive. He frowns. "What?"

John closes his eyes and shakes his head, but his smile doesn't dim. "Perhaps this is heaven."

Gale hums. His arms wrap around John's waist. Before he could second-guess it, he gives John's cracked lips a kiss. The taste of iron is a small price to pay for the joy it gives him to be able to do this again. "Some heaven."

"You know it, Buck." John opens his eyes again and smiles. "As long as you're with me."

He reaches up to touch Gale's jaw and pull him into another kiss, but the moment his fingers make contact, something yanks on Gale's nerves. He flinches. It's only a split second, but John catches it. He looks wide awake instantly. His fingers curl towards his palm, and, slowly, carefully, he brushes Gale's scarred left cheek with his knuckles and thumb.

"Someone hurt you."

"It's a war, John." Gale says.

His gaze finds the floor. He can sense John's hand move towards his jawline again, so he catches it in his before it could reach its target. When he glances up and their eyes meet, he feels his resolve weaken. He wants to talk about it. He wants someone to listen, to tell him it's okay, to say that nothing changed. But John can barely keep himself upright. He doesn't need Gale's problems. There's nothing to do about them anyway. What happened, happened. All that's left to him is to carry the marks.

John twists his hand gently out of Gale's grip and cups his face. His thumb moves up and down over what Gale knows is the line of the knife scar. "Where did you get this?"

Gale doesn't answer. He watches John's blue eyes go from concerned to devastated to angry, but he doesn't know how to talk to him. What's there to say?

"What about the other one?"

Gale turns his face into John's palm and closes his eyes. "It doesn't matter."

“I want to know.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Buck.”

“Just come here.” Gale pulls John close and rests his head against his. He feels one of John’s hands run through his hair, down over his nape, then behind his ear. They hold each other, and the quiet seconds tick by. After a moment, John kisses his temple. Something in Gale cracks. “One of the bastards gave me that cut to make my wounds symmetrical.”

John tenses. His hands ball into fists before he relaxes them again. “Did he touch you?”

He doesn’t say how he means it, but he doesn’t need to. *You’re so beautiful,* he told Gale once as they lay in bed during a memorable weekend pass they spent together. *They'd want to ruin you if they captured you.* Gale pushed him on his back and straddled his hips then. *I'm not so easy to ruin,* he said as he started moving up and down, one of his hands on John’s thigh. *I know,* John sighed and moved to meet his rhythm, *I know. But they’d try.*

“He wanted to.” Gale says. He doesn’t tell John that there were four of them. That it was only sheer luck that someone heard his cry for help and that he could get out of it with only a cut. “You were right.”

He takes a deep breath, then another, but it's still hard to word his deepest pain out loud. “I thought I would be able to take it better.” But he couldn't. He has never been so scared in his life. He still is.

When he squeezes John’s waist, John starts rocking him from side to side. “I'm here now.”

Gale smiles. Bittersweet love wells up in his chest and in the corners of his eyes. “Did you miss me?”

John grins against his cheek. “I traded my sheepskin for you.”

A chuckle bursts out of Gale. “Miracles still exist, huh?”

John’s lips press to his scar. “They do.”

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!